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AUTHOR Young, Lynne
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ABSTRACT

A student-conducted survey in the English-as-a-second-language (ESL) unit of Carleton University's Centre for Applied Language Studies was taken to determine the types of language activities students would like to have in their courses. The survey had two objectives: to get a description of types of assignments and tests used in a variety of courses in a range of disciplines, and to heighten students' awareness of their needs. Several potential problems of this and similar studies surfaced during the survey: (1) rapidly changing student demographics may cause student needs to change from year to year; (2) the ESL student population is heterogeneous and may not have a common core of needs; (3) the survey may not have been thorough enough; and (4) due to late registrants, the survey took too long to be of maximum usefulness. The process would be more useful if several surveys were conducted in the course of a year to provide a database of student needs, allowing teachers to develop each course based on the characteristics of students who enroll in it. (MSE)

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Needs Assessment Surveys

Lynne Young

Centre for Applied Language Studies
Carleton University

Introduction

The following report discusses one approach to needs assessment surveys. This approach was adopted in a survey which was recently conducted in the ESL unit of the Centre for Applied Language Studies, Carleton University. Two advanced ESL groups carried out an assignment (see Appendix) to determine the types of language activities they would participate in in their courses at Carleton University. Students were required to determine types of tests and exams given in these courses. The various categories of tests and activities were broken down into smaller subcategories to help students identify, with some specificity, assignments and requirements of each course. For example, the writing category listed some of the following: essays, lab reports, problem solving, experiments, programming, etc. Evaluation included categories such as essay form, short answer, multiple choice, etc. A more complete description of the assignment is included in the Appendix.

The assignment led to musings on this type of survey as well as on needs surveys in general. A discussion of these issues follows the results of the survey. They are included because the area is one which requires continued reappraisal and

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input. My informal comments are designed to contribute to discussions on needs surveys. They are also intended to raise questions about types of surveys and the role they might, can, or should play in course design in a variety of language learning situations.

Purposes of the Assignment

There were two specific purposes of the survey. The first was to get a clearer description of actual types of assignments and tests in a variety of courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels in a wide range of disciplines, for course planning purposes. Although the composition of the student body in the ESL courses changes from term to term, that is, disciplines represented are not the same from year to year (see below under problems), I felt it would be helpful in course planning to try to determine what a given group of students identified as their requirements. Course design has frequently been on an ad hoc basis formed by one of three criteria:

1) Intuitive identification of problem areas that had either been described in the literature of applied linguistics or gathered over years of teaching;
2) Selection of themes that would be of interest to a wide range of students;
3) Availability of published or teacher prepared materials.

The second purpose of the survey was to heighten students' awareness of their own needs. Too often, students are unaware of the types of skills they require; as a result, they either cannot see the relevance of the language course material, or they do not know the actual skills they require, or are unable to identify their own problem areas. We are all familiar with the types of student replies we obtain when we ask students to identify their own needs. Too often, vague replies such as more vocabulary, grammar, spelling, come back in questionnaires. The idea of the survey was to help students

determine requirements of courses, so that they would become more knowledgeable about their needs, clearer about the purpose of assignments in the language course, and understanding of the necessity to work on problem areas on their own as well as in the class.

Results of Survey

Because of the wide range of needs that surface in individual cases, I will concentrate only on those that were described in 3-5 cases. These results are based on twenty-one needs surveys from students in advanced ESL courses./par

Needs Assessment Survey Results

Reading: Types	
Textbooks	81%
Blackboard	62%
Overhead transparencies	33%
Course notes	14%
Charts/graphs	14%
Writing: Types	
Essays/term papers	43%
Computer programming & problem solving	43%
Short answer	14%
Lab reports and experiments	19%
Speaking: Types	
Consultation with T.A.	19%
Group discussion	19%
Oral presentation	14%
Listening: Types	
Notetaking	66%
Lecture	38%
Taped lectures/films	14%
Tests: Types	
Essay - long and short	57%
Computer programming or problem solving	57%
Multiple choice	62%
Short answer	33%

Needs Surveys: Problems and Comments

I include the following comments on the problems related to the survey so that others interested in conducting a similar one will be aware of some of the pitfalls as well as some of the factors which make this type of survey necessarily incomplete.

First, I mentioned above that the composition of the course changes from year to year. In the seven years of teaching in the ESL program at Carleton, we have seen a decided shift of areas of study from engineering and technology to business, commerce and social science. Five, four, and even three years ago, most of the students who filled our ESL courses were hoping to get into, or were already enrolled in, the Faculty of Engineering. While there are still some students in this area of study, the majority are now interested in Commerce, Business, or Economics. Interestingly, this change has been accompanied by, or perhaps caused by, a radical change in ethnic make-up of our classes. Up until about 1 or 2 years ago, our classes were composed primarily of South American students with a smattering from other areas. This year, our advanced classes are about 90% Oriental; the other 10% is French Canadian, Spanish, Turkish, and Portuguese. The change also brings with it different language problems. The obvious implication is that the language course material has to be adapted with some frequency to meet changing student interests and needs. Therefore, a needs survey in any one term yields descriptions that may no longer be applicable a year or even a term later.

Second, our ESL classes are heterogenous in a variety of ways. Students who come to us may be any one of the following: special, part-time undergraduate, full-time undergraduate, or graduate students. A needs survey based on responses from a varied group such as this will necessarily look like a hodge-podge of information from which it is difficult to isolate core problem areas for a signifigant segment of the class. For example, while an undergraduate may need to develop

notetaking or library skills, a graduate student may not need either, but may instead require specific writing and research skills in order to complete a thesis. Heterogeneity of a different sort compounds this problem. We have always had a wide range of disciplines represented in our classes—from Geology to Zoology. A needs survey of students in these varied subject areas yields such disparate needs and interests that the teacher is at best confused; at worst s/he may be discouraged in the attempt to design a course that answers student needs. The obvious question is whose needs? We have all been planning courses on the assumption that there are a set of basic core needs that fit under the heading EAP. Is this assumption really true? What are these needs? Is there, in fact, a common core?

The third problem that surfaced as a result of the survey is one that includes two related areas. First, as might be expected, the thoroughness with which the students carried out the survey varied tremendously. Reports on the survey ranged from half a page of vague comments to five typewritten, highly detailed pages with much irrelevant information. This problem is partly a result of the assignment instructions which did not specify length; it also, however, reflects both the students' own ability/inability to understand the importance of thoroughness and to be committed enough to the course to carry out a difficult assignment handed out in the first week.

A second closely related problem concerns the late entry of many of the students. Due to late registration at Carleton, students frequently do not show up in class until the second or third week of classes. The purpose of the survey is obviously to ensure that the course answers identified needs; however, if the reports are to indicate the direction of the course, in some areas at least, they can only do so if they are completed early enough. It is rather difficult to teach a course for three to four weeks and then to change in mid-stream. The number

of reports handed in during the first two weeks of courses was quite small—it grew until most reports were in by the middle of the fourth week. Some late registrants didn't finally hand in the report until the end of week four. The processing of the reports then took two weeks, by which time half the term was over.

Given this timing problem, needs surveys of this sort would be useful if several were conducted over a full academic year, findings collated, and then used to form the basis of future courses. We need a battery of needs survey results. This would permit a teacher to select the appropriate profiles of her students' needs as soon as the courses meet. In other words, if there were a series of surveys that identified types of needs of a variety of disciplines at graduate and undergraduate levels and of different ethnic groups, then at the beginning of the course the teacher could conduct an informal survey of his/her class to match the needs with students. Teachers could then plan courses according to a set of preidentified needs. This, of course, assumes a flexibility on the part of the teachers, who could not map out a course until students had actually been met. However, if a battery of needs surveys and appropriate matching teaching materials were available, then teachers could instantly access and process these materials.

One final note about needs surveys: this type of survey is only one among many that are needed to begin to determine language course content. Three other types immediately come to mind. The first is a survey of professors in a variety of disciplines to discover their requirements and their impression of foreign student problem areas. The second is a survey of both native and second language student 'A', 'B', 'C', and 'D' papers, reports, assignments, to determine what constitutes good, acceptable, and bad work. To date, we as ESL teachers have only a very sketchy idea of the standards in a variety of fields; as a result, we may be expecting too

much of our students—a comment several of us frequently have made. We may also be emphasizing the wrong things. The third type is a survey of actual materials (both written and spoken) that students use in a variety of disciplines. This would involve two kinds of research: one—an examination of discourse studies already completed and, two, an analysis of discourse characteristics in the disciplines under consideration that have not yet been analyzed and reported on.

Conclusion

The results suggest that there are in fact core skills that are needed by most students. However, the results do not indicate all the needs identified, nor can they alone guide us in planning courses. It is obvious that we need to conduct a variety of types of needs surveys; to continue to plan courses and design materials in a vacuum is, I think, time-consuming, and of questionable value.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Robert Ahad, a student in the Certificate for Teaching English as a Second Language Program at Carleton University, who plowed through all of the reports, extracted relevant information, and devised a chart which outlined the types of language skills required in courses.

APPENDIX

Needs Assessment Survey

Needs Assessment Survey *

Since 21.190 is designed to prepare you for academic study in English, the focus will be on those skills you will need in specific programs of study. Because each group of students have different needs, you are asked in this activity to help identify requirements in your other courses at Carleton. This will ensure that the many aspects of the ESL course are most closely suited to your needs.

There are several types of skills that all students need; however, some skills may be needed more by one group than by another. For example, in many science courses, lab reports are required while in social science courses they may not be.

The thoroughness with which you carry out this assignment will determine the degree to which this course answers your needs.

Assignment

The survey you will carry out will be written up in a report. This will be presented to the class, to your ESL instructor and may be used as the basis for future ESL Courses. It should therefore be as complete as possible. Since several of you may be in the same fields of study and at the same level (undergraduate or graduate) you may work together on this report.

I Format

Your report should contain information - in complete sentences - on each of the following categories:

* 1) Tests/Exams
* 2) Course Requirements/Syllabus
* 3) Course assignments

* See below for more information on each of these topics.

II Due Dates

a) January 6 - all information collected
- discuss presentation of information with group and with ESL instructor

b) January 9 - report to be presented to class and to ESL instructor.

III Procedures

1) Obtain a course syllabus for the courses you are currently taking or that you hope to take in the Spring, Summer or Fall terms.

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1) Obtain a course syllabus for the courses you are currently taking or that you hope to take in the Spring, Summer or Fall terms.

III Procedures (cont'd)

a) determine from these syllabuses what the homework assignments are and what each requires. Try to determine whether they involve mainly reading, writing or problem solving etc.

b) determine how much you are expected to read each week. Also find out if this reading is mainly of textbooks, lab reports, journals or a combination of all.

c) determine the types of writing you will have to do. If this is not clearly explained in the syllabus, discuss it with your professor or teaching assistant. Also try to find out which you will do most frequently. Some of the types are:

1) Summaries and abstracts of books and journal articles
2) Research papers
3) Lab/Experimental reports
4) Proposals
5) Annotated bibliographies
6) Problem solving projects or reports
7) Answers to essay questions on tests
8) Other - please specify

2) Go to the library or department office and look at three tests in your field of study. Record the following information:

1) Course title and number
2) Type of test questions on the test paper
3) Are the questions based primarily on the textbook, other assigned reading or lectures or a combination of all of these.

3) Write up a short description of the lectures in your course, include answers to some of the following:

a) Is the lecture based on material from the textbook?
b) Does the lecture cover areas not discussed in the textbook?
c) Does the lecturer use blackboard, overhead transparencies, slides in his/her lectures?
d) Is the important information put on the board?
e) Are you expected to take many or few notes during the lecture?

You will probably want to discuss these questions with other students in your course and with your professor.

Report

Record all of the information that you obtain. You might also record your reactions to your findings. Were you surprised at how much you have to read? etc.

Remember that the information you collect will be useful in two ways. First, it will give you a clear idea of course requirements. Second, this information will be extremely helpful to your ESL instructor in planning the ESL course so that it is most useful to you.

* This is adapted from a needs survey instrument developed by Kathryn Herviz Hauges, University of Minnesota,: "Needs Assessments: Teaching Students to Do Their Own" which was distributed at the 17th annual TESOL conference, March, 1983.